

Summary of recent weather and pheasant trends in Iowa.

Wildlife Bureau has standardized roadside counts dating to 1962 (half a century-50 yrs) and pheasant populations have NEVER increased during that 50 year period when average winter snowfall is more than 31 inches.

- FACT - hens die in winters with a lot of snow - dead hens don't lay eggs.

In springs with more than 8 inches of rainfall pheasant counts have increased only ONCE in 50 years.

- FACT – pheasant reproduction is very poor in wet springs.

The trend data below shows winter/spring weather, DNR roadside pheasant counts, and hunter pheasant harvest trends (bad winters and springs in bold text). We had a bad winter in 2001 (39") snowfall and counts plummeted, but look at the winters of 2002-03 both very mild winters 13 and 17 inches of snow respectively (green box). Look at what pheasant counts did – 128% increase in 2002 and 42% increase in 2003. Look at what pheasant harvest did 470,000 in 2001 to 1 Million+ roosters in 2003.

Trends in Iowa weather, pheasant counts, and pheasant harvest over the last decade.

	Bad Winter		2 Mild Winters		5 Consecutive Bad Winters							
	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Snowfall (inches)	21	39	13	17	37	18	23	30	42	32	47	38
Rainfall (inches)	5.6	10.7	7.8	7.9	9.7	7.4	6.8	9.9	11.7	7.2	7.9	8.8
Pheasant Count	34	14	32	45	30	35	27	26	18	15	11	7
% Chg Count		-59%	128%	42%	-34%	18%	-23%	-5%	-32%	-12%	-27%	-38%
Pheasant Harvest	1,001,867	470,116	729,460	1,080,466	756,184	806,601	748,025	631,638	383,083	271,126	238,208	?
% Chg Harvest		-53%	55%	48%	-30%	7%	-7%	-16%	-39%	-29%	-12%	?

Now look at the last 5 years 2007-11 (blue box), this is why pheasant numbers are so low. Since pheasant were introduced (~1910) Iowa has never had 5 consecutive bad winters in a row - it is unprecedented. In addition 3 of the springs have been very bad (over 8" rainfall) for reproduction.

Following the bad winter in 2001, the Wildlife bureau received lots of calls to close the season and/or change bag limits. However, these do nothing to impact the population because hens are protected from hunting. Changes to a rooster only hunting season does not make dead hens come to life.

From a management perspective, pheasants can recover quickly from these severe weather events if we have the weather and the appropriate habitat (proof is 2001-03). Obviously Wildlife bureau cannot change the weather so DNR's focus is on the habitat side. The DNR can influence habitat on public wildlife areas of which the DNR has 103,197 grassland/wetland acres on public lands statewide – this equals 0.3% of the states land area. The other 99.7% of the state is owned by private landowners, so the DNR has no say over how they manage habitat in 99.7% of the state where 99.7% of our pheasant population lives.

The best pheasant habitat on private lands in Iowa is CRP. In 2003 Iowa had 1.9M acres of CRP habitat, in 2011 Iowa had only 1.6M acres a -16% loss? Other habitats beneficial to pheasants in Iowa on private land are hay, oats, and wheat. In 2003 Iowa had 1.8M acres of these habitats, in 2011 Iowa had only 1.3M acres a -28% loss?

This information shows weather is the biggest reason for our current low pheasant numbers. Our loss of CRP and other habitats (800,000 acres in 8 years) is only adding insult to the weather conditions.

What about areas that are now basically "extinct" of pheasant populations? Can't the DNR stock them?

We heard this same question in 2001. Our surveys show pheasants are still present in all counties within Iowa, so the base stock exists to recover numbers (just as in 2001) IF the weather gives the birds the opportunity to recover. The birds are very adept at finding and using unoccupied habitat.

The keys issues are – the habitat has to be there for the birds to expand to AND Mother Nature has got to provide us with good weather and give the birds a chance to use the habitat.

If we see several consecutive good years of weather patterns (eg, like 2002 and 2003) and bird populations don't respond in a region the DNR would consider moving wild birds. However, please take this statement with a bit of realism. If the DNR moved 1,000 wild birds into say your county that would equate to approximately a little more than 1 bird released for every square mile. Folks sometimes do not consider the scale or cost of what seems like a simple solution. If we release birds in one county, how about all the other counties in Iowa – why one county verses some other county?

So what is the DNR doing about pheasants?

We conducted a review of bird populations with a diverse group of stakeholders in December 2009 at the request of the Iowa legislature and the recommendations from that group to the DNR were:

1. Keep suitable pheasant habitat for pheasants on the landscape.
2. Expand the staff DNR has to work with private landowners.
3. A funding source for #1 and #2 needs to be found.

The full report with recommendations and who participated with much more information is on DNR's website at: http://www.iowadnr.gov/portals/idnr/uploads/Hunting/upland_report.pdf?amp;tabid=475

So as directed by this advisory group the Wildlife Bureau has attempted to implement 1 and 2 even though we have no new money. If the new legislatively established Outdoor Trust Fund were funded dollars would be available <http://www.iowadnr.gov/InsideDNR/GrantsOtherFunding/NaturalResourcesRecTrust.aspx>

We've entered into a partnership with Pheasants Forever to put more staff (#2 above) on the ground to work with private landowners, we'll be adding 5 more positions soon. A list of these biologists is on our website as well as habitat information.

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/Environment/LandStewardship/WildlifeLandownerAssistance/FinancialAssistance.aspx>

We've had a successful CRP practice for pheasants (#1 above) fully enrolled ~30,000 acres called SAFE, we asked USDA for an additional 20,000 acres, but USDA denied our request.

http://www.iowadnr.gov/portals/idnr/uploads/Wildlife%20Stewardship/gaining_ground_wildlife.pdf?amp;tabid=1208

We've instituted a new habitat development (#1 above) and hunter access program on private lands this summer and hope to have 10,000+ acres enrolled in the next 2 years. Unfortunately this was a 3 yr grant and with federal budget problems USDA has pulled our 3rd year of funding.

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/Hunting/PlacestoHuntShoot/HabitatAccessProgram.aspx>

So this is a sampling of what the Wildlife Bureau has been doing for pheasants. However, the bottom line is until the weather returns to "normal" pheasants populations will remain low (with this current weather pattern) regardless of habitat, hunting seasons, or stocking.

This current winter has at least started (almost zero snowfall in Dec 2011) similar to what we saw in winter of 2002. This is exactly the kind of winter we need for bird numbers to rebound.